

The Forgotten Elites: Multi-Ethnic Aristocrats and Their Diplomatic Roles in the 19th Century Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹

Pran Jintrawet*

語られないエリートたち
— 19世紀のサイアム外務省における貴族の外交的役割 —

プラーン ジントラウエート*

Abstract

The reign of Rama V is one of the most studied periods in Siamese history, especially with the emphasis on the impeccable diplomatic success in securing independence from imperial encroachment during the 19th century. The most familiar and conventional narrative venerates the talents and sagacity of royal elites, particularly the king and his half-brothers, which served as the premise for the success. By focusing on specific parts drawn from the biographies of Krom Tha officials' descendants, composing with multi-ethnic aristocrats mainly the Chinese, the Persian, and the Portuguese who had actively played crucial roles in Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this paper will illustrate that the existing narrative has largely concealed these officials' roles and greatly neglected their decades-long accumulated diplomatic skills and intellectual lineages. This paper argues that, in order to gain a clearer understanding of what the Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs achieved subsequently and the transformation of Siam into a modern state, one needs to bear in mind the contribution of traditional official elites, who not only paved a significant foundation for Siam but also functioned as key actors in acquiring and contacting foreigners. Most importantly, these elites were leading representatives of Siam to the international society and in return secured international recognition toward the Siamese absolutist state.

Keywords : Multi-ethnic aristocrats², Krom Tha³, Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

*PhD Program, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University
Email: pranjintrawet@ruri.waseda.jp

1. Introduction

The reign of Rama V (1868-1910) is one of the most studied periods in Siamese historical scholarship, especially with the regard to the conventional narrative which has largely emphasized diplomatic history and celebrated how the Siamese court, mainly the King and his half-brothers, successfully and brilliantly managed to maintain Siam's independence from colonial encroachment. At the heart of their diplomatic talent and survival tactics was the socially inherited timeless "character of Thainess", as coined by Prince Damrong Rachanubhab (1862-1943) (hereafter Damrong). Furthermore the conventional narrative has also underscored how royal cohorts masterly adopted and absorbed Western diplomatic practices and frameworks to secure Siamese independence and shape the modern Siamese Foreign Ministry and modern state as a whole. It appears that the success of Siamese diplomacy in securing independence solely relies on the nous and talent of kings and princes. Thus, this dominant royal-nationalist narrative has become the foundation to the understanding of Thai history as a whole.⁴ Nevertheless, many renowned scholars have suggested that this narrative also evades tackling with many striking issues, including colonial conditions surrounding Siam,⁵ Siamese elites collaboration with colonial neighbors especially in the economic arena,⁶ and Siamese acts of colonizer rather than adopting the approach of 'internal integration' toward its former vassals such as Lanna, Patani, and Puan states and the like.⁷

Besides many of the misleading premises of the conventional narrative as suggested by innumerable scholars suggested above, this paper would illustrate how royal-nationalist narrative conceals the stories of other key actors who played active roles in the ranks of the Siamese MFA in earning Siam the recognition from international society, which was centered in Europe at the time, and their involvement in transforming Siam in the broader sense. These people were descendants of Siamese noblemen and aristocrats with multi-ethnic origin mainly consisted with the Chinese, the Persian, and the Portuguese, who had long been serving in many administrative ranks, especially from Krom Tha, a pre-MFA organization, since the early Bangkok period. The reason is that, in my view, it is impossible to understand what MFA succeeded later on in gaining recognition for Siam without considering the multi-ethnic nature of Krom Tha, the main, if not the only, foundation for the transformation of Siamese state, and some of their members' biographies. In so doing, it would bring another dimension to the current historiography of Thailand. As the conventional narrative goes that these noblemen originally wielded considerable power in Siamese administrative circle since the 18th century to mid-19th century. In general, they were conservative and strong-headed opponents to the reform.⁸ However thanks to the timely consolidation scheme of Rama V particularly during the mid-1880s that usurped these outdated noblemen's roles in administrative structure and launched the reformation under the leadership of the King and his half-brothers, the reform served as the watershed between traditional and modernized Siam.⁹ Modernized Siam saw a large number of aristocrats fading from governmental scene, or their roles and duties would be, if not entirely, under the umbrella of princely actions.¹⁰ Therefore, it was not that they were completely

overshadowed, but unfortunately previous studies have overlooked many aspects pertinent to these aristocrats. These include questions like: how were these noblemen, whom were preconditioned to be conservative able to serve in Siamese consular corps alongside the King's half-brothers? How did they gain diplomatic experience and skills? Why following royal consolidation, were these old-fashioned aristocrats able to return to the administrative circle, especially in the realm of foreign affairs? This paper will deliberate these conundrums through a close examination of the biographies of Krom Tha members and further developing the lens introduced by Nidhi Eoseewong¹¹ regarding intellectual and worldview developments of Siamese elites in the early Bangkok period to illuminate on the important figures left out in the current Thai historiography. Certainly their biographies were not the complete novelty among previous studies. However, the previous literature has never utilized these biographical data to provide a clearer picture of MFA's emergence. The next would touch upon previous studies related to Siamese noblemen.

2. Different voices on Siamese noblemen

The most conventional and fundamental studies have been the so-called "Damrong school", obviously named after Damrong aka the father of Thai history. The main theme of Damrong's narrative is that Siam survived imperial threats by the foresighted monarch who was equipped with unmatched diplomatic skills and talents. This, along with the timeless character of Thainess, prompted Siam to secure its independence.¹² For Damrong, these characters never ceased to exist among the Siamese, especially royal elites, throughout the centuries-long history of Thailand.

The conventional narrative would serve as the basis for the next school of history, the so-called "modernization school". Even though this group followed the suit of the Damrong school in terms of celebrating royal actions, the narrative would appear in a more systematic and clear-cut style. Its aim was to describe how Siam transformed from traditional to modernized state by marking Rama V's governmental reform in 1880s-1890s as the watershed of the transition period.¹³ With this clear distinction, the modernization school reaffirms the conventional notion of royal ability in a systematic respect. It goes that the stubborn old guards obstructed modernization projects of the reform-oriented monarch and his half-brothers. At the end of the day, the progressive Rama V and his clique prevailed and the reform completely and irrevocably changed Siam.

Another trope on Siamese noblemen focus on the intellectual experience of Siamese elites, particularly in the early Bangkok period during the late 18th-early 19th century, which later served as the embryo of Siamese transformation. One of the leading figures in this school is Nidhi Eoseewong, who explored the changing style of literature and poetry during the early days of Bangkok when Siamese elites were heavily involved with and enjoyed lucrative income from maritime trade. By doing so, he proposed that the writing style of literature appeared to be more aligned with rationalism, humanism, and empirical worldview.¹⁴ In other words, from their maritime

trade experience, Siamese elites absorbed and developed the so-called merchant-oriented culture or, in Nidhi's word, the "bourgeois culture". This culture prompted Siamese elites to be prone to resolve conflict and encounter foreign culture in a compromising and collaborative manner rather than resorting to armed force unlike its neighbors.¹⁵

We can also see that Nidhi called an attention to the intellectual heritage accumulated from maritime trade experience, which served as the foundation for the less violent modernization scheme in the mid-19th century. For instance the decision to comply with the British and sealing the Treaty of 1855. Given that there were those older generations who were unwilling to indulge with the British and those willing to abide by the request. At the end of the day, the old guards stepped aside and clear the way for the treaty signing.¹⁶

In sum, it might not be wrong to say that Nidhi implicitly challenged the timeless Thai characters championed by Damrong and the conventional narrative. Though many historical events suggest that Siamese elites did illustrate those national characters especially an acuity to assimilation. Nevertheless for Nidhi, this character was far from being timeless but rather a trait that emerged during the early Bangkok period at the peak of the maritime trade boom.

Still, it seems that merely maritime trade was not the only kind of experience that shaped the bourgeois culture among Siamese elites. Besides duties involving maritime trade, multi-ethnic aristocrats, particularly those in Krom Tha, also had to deal with and contact Westerners in different issues, including treaty signing, trade bargaining, and territorial negotiation. These experiences made a no less valuable contribution to Siamese elites' intellectual development. Not only did they help forge the bourgeois culture, but they were also the avenue for Siamese elites to encounter and get acquainted with Western diplomatic knowledge and practices. Still, Nidhi's work shed light on the intellectual continuity starting from the early Bangkok period. Along this line, this paper will argue that Krom Tha officials acquired Western diplomatic skills through the experience of performing their duties and tasks. These experiences would elevate many of them to fill the ranks within MFA and became the main force of the ministry since 1880s the heyday of the prince regime.¹⁷

In short, the scope of previous studies mentioned above prompted most of the former scholarships to skip some details in the primary sources especially with regards to certain continuities among the circle of Krom Tha officials. To recognize aspects of those continuities, this paper will disturb the usual periodization as it refrains us from seeing the continuity among the circle of Siamese elites. Along the line of Nidhi's works, this paper will be conducted by looking at the development of Krom Tha since the establishment of Bangkok and how their officials formed specific values and a worldview which allowed them to serve under the newly established MFA an entity, previously perceived to be solely under the prince regime. Also cases of some Bunnags

and Celestino Xavier will be brought to light. Then, this paper will conclude with how exploring biographies of descendants of traditional officials might bring a new aspect to the study of MFA and the emergence of modern Siam as a whole. Lastly, future research suggestion will be outlined.

3. Siamese traditional administrative structure - Krom Tha

After the downfall of Ayutthaya in 1767, the remaining of Ayutthaya noblemen and officials gathered and founded the new kingdom of Rattanakosin or Bangkok. To construct a new capital, Siamese elites had to rely heavily on maritime trade to nurse the economy back to health. Given this condition, the new Siamese capital hosted many traders from across the world, including Chinese, Moors, Persian, Cambodian, Makassars, Bugis, Dutch, French, and so on who traded through sea lanes like the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Malaya Straits.¹⁸

The administrative apparatus that oversaw trade activities and took charge of foreign affairs was Krom Tha, which was later transformed to MFA. Krom Tha had various duties if we conceptualize it through the lens of modern bureaucracy. This entity was actually one of the three major pillars of Bangkok's administrative structure, along with Kalahom and Mahattai. These three ministries' duties and responsibilities were territorial.¹⁹ In theory, all three shared quite similar tasks in their respective region such as appointing governors, collecting tax and wild goods, and conscript *phrai* (universal labors). However, in practice, different regions owned different geography and terrain. Kalahom took charge of southern cities and supervising tributary states and principalities southward, including Malay states. Mahattai administered mountainous northern cities and also had to arrange issues with tributary states northward. Krom Tha was assigned to oversee no less than 10 seaborne cities surrounding Bangkok.²⁰ This automatically prompted Krom Tha's main duty to supervise all matters pertinent to trading including tariff collection, ship building, products manufacturing, dealing with legal issues related to trade activities, and governing major ports along Siamese trade routes. In some occasions, Krom Tha had the authority to assemble an army to protect any port cities under their control or even to occupy other port cities.²¹ Besides trading activities, Krom Tha also had another significant duty: transmitting news and knowledge as well as diplomatic practices that came along with trade. In other word, this means all diplomatic missions, negotiations, tributary mission, and the like needed to firstly undergo Krom Tha's consideration and translation prior to a presentation before the sovereign. This was because maritime traders and tributary mission not only loaded their ships with cargoes and goods but also carried with them news and political circumstance of their hometown. By taking this into account, Krom Tha also acted as Siam's knowledge transmitter be it from China to Malay sultanates. Due to its territorial responsibilities, Krom Tha emerged to be the most significant ministry as exemplified by some foreigners who mistakenly addressed the head of Krom Tha as "prime minister".²²

We can see that Krom Tha was a huge and multi-functional organization. In other word, it was not

surprising that Krom Tha required a large number of officials who were capable of dealing with their various duties. Yet, the war with Ava caused the shortage of eligible Siamese officials. In addition, the organization had to encounter many foreign merchants and diplomats.²³ With these two reasons combined, most Krom Tha officials were foreigners, many of whom originally resided in Bangkok. The Chinese comprised the majority of Krom Tha officials as they were able to exploit the existing huge Chinese commercial network in Southeast Asia. They were also equipped with the language skill used in trade and diplomatic missions in tributary system with China, the prime trade partners of Siam. Equally significant is the group of Persian descendants, whose origin can be traced back to the Ayutthaya period, including the prominent Bunnag family.²⁴ The Bunnag's ancestors had long been a gateway for Muslim and Persian traders heading to the Siamese court. They also participated in several palace coups which led to dynastic change including the one that gave birth to the Chakri dynasty.²⁵ Given the cordial bond between the two families as well as their inherited trading and diplomatic skills, the Bunnag elevated to the top of Siam's administrative pyramid. Since the second reign, Krom Tha and Kalahom were in the hands of the Bunnag. By having these two grand ministries in their disposal means that the Bunnag would supervise matter in relation to strategic coastal cities and tributary states southward of Siam, the gateway for foreign traders and diplomats to the kingdom, which would enabled them to get acquainted with Western diplomatic knowledge and skills.

Some Europeans also occupied prominent positions in Krom Tha with the Portuguese appeared to be the largest group. At the early stage of Bangkok, many Portuguese refugees who escaped from the sack of Ayutthaya arrived at Bangkok and settled along the bank of Chao Phraya River. Three notable Portuguese communities emerged in Bangkok namely Samsen, Santa Cruz, and Rosario.²⁶ Apart from serving as mercenaries and arms dealers, they also introduced many military tactics and weapons to the Siamese court.²⁷ When the contact with the British heightened since the dawn of the third reign, the Portuguese started their new role as translators and interpreters.²⁸ They gradually occupied the translation bureau of Krom Tha, putting them at the forefront of Siamese officials in dealing with Westerners, the role which remained in their hands until Rama V's reign.

Since the Bunnag had control over both Krom Tha and Kalahom, it would not be wrong to state that they were destined to be the most influential official family. Already in the early nineteenth century, the Bunnag family, given their prerogatives, appeared to be the decisive kingmakers, ranging consecutively from Rama III (1824-1851), Rama IV (1851-1868), and Rama V (1868-1910). Besides their considerable authority in the court coupling with their responsibilities, the Bunnag and other Krom Tha official elites were the frontline when it comes to acquiring western diplomatic knowledge since 1820s. By this experience, they gradually honed relevant skills in treaty negotiation and several diplomatic protocols, which even surpassed the royal elites.²⁹

3.1 Frontline of Siam in encountering with the West

In 1825, British authority in India lodged their demand for free trade toward Siam. The British movement coincided with the moment when the young Dit Bunnag (1788-1855), the leader of the Bunnag, simultaneously became the head of Krom Tha and Kalahom. He and his relatives would be key persons in finalizing the treaty with the British.³⁰ Dit's sons would later on took up many key governmental posts for instance Chaung (1808-1883) as the head of Kalahom, Kham (1813-1870) the head of Krom Tha, Thuam (1829-1913) Kham's successor, Chum (1820-1866) the leader of the Siamese diplomatic mission to London, and so on.

The Bunnag were the main proponents of acceding to the British demands though Rama III and some courtiers were against the deal. At the end of the day, Rama III decided to refrain from making any decision and left it to those nobles who were most involved, obviously this means the Bunnag and Krom Tha officials.³¹ Eventually, the treaty was finalized in 1826.

Chuang succeeded his father as the head of Kalahom in 1851 when Dit stepped aside from administrative circle due to his senility. While Kham, Chuang's half-brother, became the head of Krom Tha in the same year. The next generation of the Bunnag, under the leadership of Chuang, was also responsible for the conclusion of another free trade treaty with the British, the Bowring treaty in 1855. John Bowring, the head of the British delegation, noted that the main force behind the success of the negotiation was Chuang, whose family's economic interest had been closely linked to foreign trade for many generations.³²

Besides managing treaty signing, the Bunnag was also the frontline in acquiring and adapting Western knowledge. For instance, the treaty of 1826, which also concerned border issues in the Malay states, introduced the Bunnag to Western topographical and geographical knowledge that preferred the clear-cut border line and demarcation rather than the ambiguity of indigenous Mandala system.³³ They also imported Western science, especially naval technology as seen in their decision to purchase British steamships.³⁴ Chuang was also interested in Western ships and launched his ship-building project in the Western style.³⁵ More importantly, increasing economic and political intercourse with the British from 1820s onward gradually required Krom Tha officials to be able to command English, the language which was not inherited by any of the multi-ethnic Krom Tha officials. The Bunnag's responsibilities covered affairs of the Malay states under Kalahom and trade negotiation under Krom Tha, thus heavily involving with the British. Hence, they were among the first group of Siamese elites to send their children abroad since the early 1870s almost a decade ahead of the royal family.³⁶ The third generation of Bunnag like To Bunnag (1851-1909), grandson of Chuang, and Pohn (1849-1920), the youngest son of Dit, went to England for their education in 1872.³⁷ On the contrary, only one prince, Prince Svasti, was sent to England in 1880s, one decade after those of the Bunnag's.³⁸

We can see that the Bunnag and Krom Tha wielded a great deal of authority in the matter of foreign affairs and seemed to be capable of adapting to changing international circumstance. This aspect is actually not so surprising in the conventional narrative, which goes that despite their supreme power, the progressive echelon of Rama IV's sons would circumvent the authority of those conservative noblemen through the fiscal reform in 1870s. Krom Tha was then transformed into MFA. Generally, MFA was treated as the new chapter of Siamese foreign affairs which followed the structure and function of the Europeans. MFA was the shift from territorial based functions to the duty-oriented ministry. Regarding MFA personnel, previous literature attribute the success and development of MFA to the prince-minister while many diplomats in the field were largely overlooked or overshadowed by princely actions. Another feature of conventional narrative is that the Bunnag also left no trace of being a progressive force. They stood against all the reform launched by the king. For this paper, this notion is very contradictory. How could the most seasoned officials on foreign affairs become so conservative and have no role at all in MFA?

To address preceding puzzles, the next section will illustrate some features of MFA personnel in practice. In addition, the process of how they gained experience and rose to become members of diplomatic corps will also be discussed. It is also important to note that in order to get a clearer picture of the emergence of MFA and the transformation of Siam into a modern state, one needs to bear in mind some continuity of traditional official elites, who not only paved a significant foundation for Siam but were also key actors in contacting foreigners as well representing Siam to the international society.

4. Old guard after the royal consolidation

As mentioned multiple times above, the conventional narrative treated Krom Tha's officials and other well-established noble as the remnant of the traditional system and the conservative element of Siam. This section will suggest another perspective by highlighting biographical data of Krom Tha's official elites' descendants namely the Bunnag and the Xavier.

The Bunnag, as deliberated earlier, were the prominent aristocrats in Krom Tha and the key negotiators in Siamese treaties. The echelon of young princes circumvented their roles in foreign affairs since the early 1880s and totally usurped the department in 1885 by the establishment of MFA. Several Bunnags, though hindered from ministerial positions, remained active officials of the newly founded ministry. Among them were sons of Chum Bunnag, son of Dit and Siamese envoy to London in 1856, namely Chuen (1846-1915), Choem (1859-1939), Koet (1862-1936), and the third generation of the Bunnag who served in Krom Tha.

Chuen, the eldest son, brought up following traditional customs of the noble Siamese family by initially serving as a royal page in the fourth reign. Then he was appointed as a commissioner to Phuket,

a territory under Kalahom's supervision, in 1876 and successfully suppressed the Chinese coolies' rebellion. In 1879, he assumed the title of Phya Montri Suriyawongse which once belonged to his father.

For Choem and Koet, after serving as royal pages, both of them were sent to study in Penang and then Calcutta to hone their English proficiency in 1871.³⁹ After spending 5 years at the center of the British Raj, the two brothers returned to Siam. In 1880, Koet became an assistant of the governor of west coastal cities helping out with interpretation and foreign language documents.⁴⁰ In 1884, Choem and Koet (hereafter Suriya) were entitled as Luang Aram-reung-riddhi and Luang Suriyanuwat, respectively.⁴¹ Luang Aram-reung-riddhi served in Krom Tha from 1884 until he was appointed as an attaché to Paris in 1889.⁴²

In 1885 during the final stage of royal consolidation and a few months ahead of the establishment of MFA, Phya Montri and Suriya were entrusted with a mission to voyage to Chiang Mai. Phya Montri became a commissioner who would take charge of frontier delimitation and international court along with the British. On the one hand, this position was the manifestation of Siamese authority toward its northern tributary. On the other, Siamese commissioners and his entourage would earn first-hand experience in dealing and directly encountering with many Europeans in the frontier particularly British consuls.

Ernest Satow, the British minister to Bangkok from 1883-1886, also wrote in his diary and reports which showed that Phya Montri got along very well with British consuls in the field, especially on the delimitation of border including the case of Thongyun River – an area abundant in teak wood claimed by Siam.⁴³ Still there were issues of communication problems and language barriers, especially in settling legal cases concerning British subjects. It is visible in Satow's account that Phya Montri always delivered the appeal and details of each cases to consult with Bangkok before submitting them to the court and British consuls.⁴⁴ But overall, Satow and his subordinates were content with the presence of Phya Montri in the Lanna tributary state. For Suriya, he served as his brother's assistant and took charge of the fiscal department in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. He was also an interpreter in the frontier.⁴⁵

Meanwhile in late 1886, the Siamese court recalled its minister to London and Paris along with several diplomats stationed in Europe. Thus the court needed to appoint new officials to fill the vacancies. With his remarkable duty and diplomatic experience in the northern frontier, Phya Montri was among the nominees and was eventually named the Siamese minister to London accompanied by Suriya.

Suriya gradually shone in the realm of diplomatic and foreign affairs. In 1888, he composed a book on diplomatic protocol and etiquette which was widely read among contemporary Siamese

diplomats. In 1889, he was briefly recalled back for MFA service but in the same year he was appointed as a charge d' affaires to Berlin. Unlike his two elder brothers who were summoned back to Siam for good, Suriya remained in consular corps until 1890s when he caught the attention of Damrong, during his trip to Europe.⁴⁶ On his letter to Rama V, Damrong assessed the condition of Siamese diplomatic bodies in Europe. He deliberated on how a lack of language proficiency had hindered numerable Siamese diplomats from having clear communication with their European counterparts. But Suriya who spoke English with ease was among the exceptional few. He was in fact the most extraordinary one. Damrong then advised the king to promote Suriya as a minister to Paris.⁴⁷ Suriya would eventually earn that position in 1896 as his predecessor asked for the permission to resign citing his limited language skills.⁴⁸

Right at the moment when he assumed the position, Suriya found himself amidst a tough negotiation with the French government as he had to lead the Siamese delegation in the revision of the 1893 treaty originated from the Paknam crisis.⁴⁹ Throughout the whole process, Suriya acted as a medium between Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns, general advisor to Siam,⁵⁰ and the French government. Later, he was also responsible for hiring Edward Strobel, an American lawyer, as a successor to Rolin-Jaequemyns. Strobel greatly helped Siamese delegation on legal terms and international law during the negotiations of 1904 and 1907 treaties, which settled the decade-longed dispute between the two nations.⁵¹

During his service in Paris, Suriya represented Siam in many occasions including the one at the 1899 Hague Conference, aiming to promote disarmament and universal peace. It was the first international conference that Siam had ever participated, though Suriya was skeptical whether the main agenda of this conference would be practically tangible.⁵² Still, he proposed that by joining this international event Siam would gain its political prestige and international recognition. Suriya's decision bore into fruition in 1919 when Siam was questioned whether its conditions would meet the requirements of being the League of Nations' founding members due to the absence of constitution and representative government.⁵³ The record of its participation in the Hague Conference of 1899 rescued Siam from being alienated from the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.

Among his other notable deeds was the loan negotiation in 1904-1905 as Siam was eager to construct the Northern line railway. The council of ministers agreed that Siam needed foreign loan in order to finish the project. Given the condition, the king assigned Suriya to settle the deal with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank and the Bank of Indochina. Suriya secured a one-million-pound loan and succeeded in bargaining the interest rate to settle at 4.5 percent instead of the 5 percent rate proposed at the outset of the negotiation.⁵⁴

We can see from the case of Chum Bunnag's sons that even after the royal consolidation,

descendants of Krom Tha remained the frontline of Siam to the outside world. Their accumulated diplomatic knowledge was indispensable in representing the Siamese court to Europe. Another case worth mentioning in this paper is Celestino Xavier, the heir of a Portuguese official in Krom Tha.

Celestino was born in 1854 into the prominent family of Rosario community. His father, Luiz Maria Xavier served in Krom Tha as an interpreter with the title of Khun Phasa-pariwat. Luiz was also a successful businessman as he established a rice mill company and owned some lands in Bangkok.⁵⁵ Rather than initially serving as royal page, Xavier went to England in 1863 for his education and later on in Paris. In 1885, he was assigned to work at the Siamese legation in Paris and accompanied several Siamese envoys to ratify many commercial treaties across Europe. With his distinguished deeds, Xavier returned to Siam in 1890 and served as a private secretary of Dewan, the MFA minister. One year after becoming an MFA official, Xavier was promoted to become the director of the translation bureau as his mastery in French was very exceptional among anglophile Siamese officials.⁵⁶

Xavier's elevation to the head of the translation bureau coincided with the escalated tension between Siam and France as both sides were fighting over Mekong region and Lao states. The conflict eventually led to the Paknam Crisis, an incident considered to be one of Siam's greatest diplomatic blunders and the unhealed trauma for Siamese elites.⁵⁷ As the director of the translation bureau, Xavier was responsible for several exchange letters between MFA and the French. He appeared to be the translator during the negotiation between Dewan and French representatives concerning the ultimatum.

Besides his role during the crisis and exceptional language skills, Xavier was also the factotum in service of Dewan, especially in the aftermath of the Paknam Crisis when the king grew distrust toward Dewan who singlehandedly oversaw foreign affairs of Siam at the time. During Dewan's downfall, MFA's records reveal that Xavier had always worked behind the scene and took charge of the ministerial structural reform when he was still the head of the translation bureau in 1899. Xavier was mainly responsible for the submission of a report that request for the ministry's reorganization. The king and the council approved of Xavier's plan to overhaul MFA and his model would last for many decades.⁵⁸ While supervising MFA reorganization, Xavier was promoted to be Phya Phipatkosa, the permanent under-secretary of MFA.⁵⁹

Later in the sixth reign, Xavier was named the Siamese minister to Rome. In 1919, he was one of the three Siamese delegates to the Paris Peace Conference, which gave birth to the League of Nations. In 1921, Xavier passed away while he was serving in Rome.

The aforementioned figures were example of descendants of aristocratic families whose origins can be traced back to Krom Tha's service. We can see that the multi-ethnic nature of Krom Tha

and partial biographies of its officials illustrated above allows us to see that what MFA subsequently accomplished owed so much to the accumulated technical skills and intellectual lineages of these “conservative” aristocrats. There were of course other worth-mentioning noble families who actively served in the Siamese diplomatic corps in the mid-19th up to the early 20th century such as descendants of Mon officials like the Kritaka and the Kotchhaseni descendants, the Jotikasatian whose ancestors emigrated from China, The Khaw family with Peranakan origin, or the Singhaseni and the Phumirat who shared Brahmin bloodline.

5. Conclusion

By deploying biographies of some members of the prestigious Bunnag family and Celestino Xavier coupled with Nidhi’s notion of intellectual development of Siamese elites, one can see the development of MFA in ways that previous studies have neglected. This paper show how the lives of these officials deeply connected and affected by the pre-modern intellectual development of Siamese elites, which dictated the way they were brought into the administrative circle and the way in which they remained crucial to MFA even after the royal consolidation as well as Siam’s state-building effort in the broader sense.

Also Krom Tha official’s biographies reveal that traditional official elites were not only not as conservative or resistant to the Western knowledge as suggested by the conventional narrative. In fact, they were the frontline of the Siamese elites in an encounter with the outside world and were actually ahead of the royal family in terms of acquiring Western knowledge and sending their children abroad. Furthermore, the accumulated experience and knowledge, even after the royal consolidation, allowed them to persist as indispensable agents who represented and bridged the Siamese absolutist state to the international arena. Still, their inherited diplomatic knowledge and skills should not be overstated. Already in 1890s, the Siamese court came to realize that the accumulated knowledge of Krom Tha descendent diplomats was rendered inadequate in the first-hand encounter with Europe. Since we see the more intricate composition of Siamese elites in the matter of foreign affairs, this can pave the way to further explore the process in which these very agents made a relentless effort to socialize with the international society and thereby earned recognition and legitimacy for its sovereign.

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Notes

- ¹ Siam, in this study, hereby refer to the kingdoms situated in Chao Phraya basin including Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin, also known as Bangkok. Siam would be known as Thailand not until 1939. So this paper would prefer to identify the country as Siam due to the period of study of this paper.

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- ² While the paper addresses the multi-ethnic character of these aristocrats, this term in the paper focuses primarily on technical skills that developed within ethnic communities, as well as the intellectual lineages of each person discussed.
- ³ Krom Tha was one of three territorial ministries of Siam. The rest were Mahattai and Kalahom. The appropriate translation of Krom Tha would be Ministry of External Relations and Maritime Trading Affairs, Mahattai would be Ministry of the North, and Kalahom would be Ministry of the South. See Breazeale K. (1999) "Thai Maritime Trade and the Ministry Responsible". In Breazeale K. (eds.) *From Japan to Arabia: Ayutthaya's Maritime Relations with Asia*. Bangkok: The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, pp. 1-54.
- ⁴ For very well-written and detailed critic on this narrative. See. Thongchai Winichakul (2011) "Siam's Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History". In Grabowsky V. (eds.) *Unraveling Myths in Southeast Asian Historiography. The volume in honor of Bass Terwiel*. Bangkok: Rivers Books, pp. 23-45.
- ⁵ Anderson, B. (1978). "Studies of the Thai State: the State of Thai Studies." In Ayal E. (eds.) *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science*. Paper in International Studies, Southeast Asian Series, No. 54. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University pp. 193-247; Herzfeld, M. (2002). "The Absent Presence: Discourse of Crypto-Colonialism". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 4, pp. 899-926; Loos, T. (2006). *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- ⁶ Hong, L. (2004). "Stranger within the Gates: Knowing Semi-Colonial Siam as Extraterritorials." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 327-354; Kullada Kesbunchoo-Mead. (2005). *the Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- ⁷ Breazeale, K. & Snit Smuckarn. (1988). *A Culture in search of survival: the Phuan of Thailand and Laos*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies; Thongchai Winichakul. (1994). *Siam Mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Loos op. cit.
- ⁸ Wyatt, D. (1969). *The politics of reform in Thailand: education in the reign of King Chulalongkorn*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- ⁹ Wyatt, D. (1969), op. cit.; Riggs F. (1966). *Thailand: the modernization of a bureaucratic polity*. Honolulu, East-West Center Press.
- ¹⁰ One of the clear example is Phraya Suriya diplomatic roles in France. His story would be deliberated afterward here.
- ¹¹ Nidhi Eoseewong (2012, 4th edition/1984, 1st edition). *Pak Kai lae Bai Rue* [Pen and Sail]. Nonthaburi: Sameskybook Press.
- ¹² Peleggi, M. (2002). *Lord of Things: The Fashioning of Siamese Monarchy's Modern Images*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p. 12.
- ¹³ Vella, W. (1955). *The impact of the West on government in Thailand*. Berkeley, University of California Press; Wyatt D. op. cit.; Tej Bunnag (1977). *The Provincial administration of Siam, 1892-1915: the Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab*. Kuala Lumpur; New York, Oxford University Press; Wilson, C. (1970). *State and Society in the Reign of Mongkut, 1851-1868: Thailand on the eve of Modernization*, a thesis

presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Cornell University.

- ¹⁴ Nidhi Eoseewong (2012), op. cit. These terms later on caused the debate, which is not the focal point of this paper.
- ¹⁵ Nidhi Eoseewong (2017), *250 pi siang krung si ayutthaya sathapna krung thon buri* [250 Anniversary of the fall of Ayutthaya and the rise of Thonburi]. For Seminar on 15 September 2017.
- ¹⁶ In comparison to Burmese counterpart especially the 1866 rebellion see Thant Myint-U (2004). *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 130-132.
- ¹⁷ Battye, N. (1974). *The military, government and society in Siam, 1868-1910: Politics and Military reform during the reign of King Chulalongkorn*. Ph.D., Cornell University; Anderson B. (1978), op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Baker, C.J. & Pasuk Phongpaichit. (2017). *A history of Ayutthaya Siam in the early modern world*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. p. 119.
- ¹⁹ Tej Bunnag. (1977), op. cit. p. 18; Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. (1960). *Thesaphiban*. In cremation book for Phraya Attakrawisunthorn. Bangkok.
- ²⁰ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. (1960), op. cit. p. 6.
- ²¹ Adisorn Muak-phimai. (1988). *Krom Tha kap rabop setthakit tai p.s. 2310-2398* [Krommatah and Thai economic system 1767-1855]. M.A., Thammasart University.
- ²² Baker, C.J. and Pasuk Phongpaichit. (2017), op. cit. p. 152.
- ²³ Adisorn, op. cit. pp. 88-89.
- ²⁴ Ibid. p. 70.
- ²⁵ Baker, C.J. and Pasuk Phongpaichit. (2017), op. cit. p. 270.
- ²⁶ Van Roy, E. (2017). *Siamese Melting Pot: ethnic minorities on the making of Bangkok*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. pp. 54-67.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Damrong Rajanubhab (1918). *khamnam Nirat London* [Foreword for Nirat London]. Khurusapa. Bangkok. p. 4.
- ²⁹ There appears in some documents revealing Rama V's lament regarding this issues for example. Thai National Archive. (A) 22/3 *phraratchahatthalekha phrabatsomdet phrachunlachomklaochaoyuhua* [Rama V's royal writings] (13 April-9 October 1875); Rama V letter to Pia Malakul.
- ³⁰ David, K. Wyatt. (1968). the politics of reform in Thailand. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press. p. 219-220.
- ³¹ Ibid. p. 29.
- ³² Nidhi Eoseewong. (2017), op. cit. p. 78.
- ³³ Thongchai Winichakul. (1994), op. cit.
- ³⁴ Nidhi Eoseewong. (2017), op. cit. p. 75.
- ³⁵ Battye, N. (1974), op. cit. p.138.
- ³⁶ Damrong. (1918), op. cit. pp. 11-13.
- ³⁷ Battye, N. (1974), op. cit. p.139.
- ³⁸ Damrong. (1918), op. cit. pp. 12-13.
- ³⁹ Thai National Archives (TNA). R. 5 T 1 (23-61) Box no. 3-4.
- ⁴⁰ Linchi Bunnag (1936). *phraborom rachowat lae phraratchahatthalekha somdet phra rama thi bodi si sin thon*

maha chulalongkon phrachunlachomklaochaoyuhua phraratchathan dae maha ammat ek phraya suriya nu wat [Rama V's royal writing and letters exchanged better Rama V and Phya Suriyanuwat]. In Phya Suriya's cremation book. Bangkok: Sri Krung, p. 7.

⁴¹ Prince Sommot Amornpan's diary date 25 February 1885.

⁴² TNA: R. 5 T 2.

⁴³ Ruxton, I. (ed.) (2016). *The diaries of Sir Ernest Mason Satow, 1883-1888: a diplomat in Siam, Japan, Britain and elsewhere*. Lexington: Lulu.com p. 249.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 252.

⁴⁵ Linchi Bunnag (1936), op. cit. p. 7.

⁴⁶ Suriya was a representative for Siam in many international events for example in 1890 he took part in the International Postal Convention in Vienna. Then the head of Siamese representative to the Chicago Exhibition in 1891 and in the same year, he was the main negotiator with the French regarding Mekong River region see Linchi Bunnag (1936), op. cit. p. 8.

⁴⁷ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. (1968). *somdet phrachaoborommawongthoe kromphraya damrong ra chanu phap sadet thawip yurop p.s. 2434* [Prince Damrong's trip to Europe in 1891]. In Mom Chao Dissanuwat's cremation book. Bangkok, p. 116.

⁴⁸ He was Prince Vadhana, Siam's minister to Paris from 1891-1896. In 1894, Vadhana asked for resignation claiming that the negotiation with French government required the certain amount of language which he was incapable of. See TNA: M R5.T/25 Volume 5 "Prince Vadhana proposed for consular corps reorganization".

⁴⁹ The 1893 crisis or Paknam Crisis was the final stage of Franco-Siamese contestation to control over Lao tributary states since the mid-1880s. Since the cohort of the king and his half-brothers totally controlled over the country's policy. They held firm on the Siamese armed-force and belief that they would be equally treated under the international law. They were convinced that the British would lend the support whenever the conflict with the French arose but this decision proved deleterious. In July 1893, French gun boats blockaded Chao Phraya River to force Siamese court to abide with the ultimatum that would make Siam abandon all its claim over the whole east bank of the Mekong River to French colonial control. See. Thongchai Winichakul. (1994), op. cit. pp. 141-150; Strate S. (2009). *The Lost Territories: the role of trauma and humiliation in the formation of national consciousness in Thailand*. Ph.D. University of Wisconsin-Madison, pp. 8-12. This crisis resulted in the treaty of 1893 but the consequence of this crisis would not be settled until 1907. See. Chompunut Nakhirak. (1970). *botbat khong thi prueksa chaotang prathet nai ratchasamai phrabatsomdet phrachunlachomklaochaoyuhua p.s. 2411-2453* [The role of Foreign Advisers during the reign of Rama V from 1868-1910] M.A. Chulalongkorn University, pp. 105-115.

⁵⁰ During the heightening border dispute with the French leading up to the Paknam Crisis, Siamese court realized that they had very limited knowledge of international law in dealing with the French especially the complicated treaty negotiation process and details. To meet this requirement, Siamese court turned to be more relied on European general advisor, Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns, a Belgian international lawyer, for legal advice. Since then, general advisor would play an important role in MFA as well as other foreign and

diplomatic issues. See. Linchi Bunnag (1936), op. cit.; Chompunut Nakhirak. (1970), op. cit. pp. 85-104; Tips W.E.J. (1996). *Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns and the making of modern Siam: the diaries and letters of King Chulalongkorn's general adviser*. Bangkok; Cherney: White Lotus.

⁵¹ Chompunut Nakhirak. (1970), op. cit. pp. 105-118.

⁵² TNA. R.5 T. 6.3 “*Suriya to Dewan*” no. 166 Paris 18 November 1898.

⁵³ Hell, S. (2007). *Siam and the League of Nations: Modernization, Sovereignty and multilateral diplomacy, 1920-1940*. Ph.D. Leiden University, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Brown, I. (1992). *The creation of the modern ministry of Finance in Siam 1885-1910*. London: The Macmillan Press, p. 86.

⁵⁵ Van Roy, E. (2017), op. cit. p. 66; TNA: R.5 T1 (23-61) Box no. 3-4 (K-R. 5 T) Roll no. 2.

⁵⁶ TNA: R.5 T2.

⁵⁷ Thongchai Winichakul. (1994), op. cit. pp. 141-150; Strate, S. (2009), op. cit. pp. 8-12.

⁵⁸ Xavier wrote critics and advices in a very detail manner and its length would surpass the spatial limitation of this paper. So for those who are interested in the full report please see. TNA R5T2.

⁵⁹ TNA: R.5 T2.